

the fast changing world of molecular biology, some of their statements are already outdated. This is a volume of conference proceedings that goes far beyond the normal boundaries of that genre, and fully justifies its editor's claims. Medieval plague will not be the same again.

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**Katherine Park, *Secrets of women: gender, generation, and the origins of human dissection*, New York, Zone Books, 2006, pp. 419, illus., £23.95, \$36.95 (hardback 978-1-890951-67-2).**

In the past two decades anatomy has been the object of an impressive number of essays, books and exhibitions. Cultural historians, art historians, medical historians, as well as general historians of the late medieval and early modern period focused their research on the emergence of human dissection, particularly in the context of western European universities. They generally agree on the chronology, the protagonists, as well as on the (limited) didactic purpose and the ritual character of public anatomy. The human body—usually the cadaver of an executed criminal—was opened, dismembered and displayed by a professor of anatomy under the eyes of an often large audience, gathered in anatomy theatres or in spaces especially re-adapted to host this solemn celebration of academic cultural distinction. In this consensual narrative, the actors—the cadaver, the anatomist, the public—are all male. In *Secrets of women*, Katherine Park casts a new light on the origin of human dissection and provides a challenging and refreshing new perspective on the history of anatomy, as well as, more generally, on the history of the body. Displacing the attention on women's bodies and moving from the public and formalized practice of dissection on male subjects to more private occasions in which women's bodies were opened (sometimes even by women) during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Park makes a case for the female body

to be “the paradigmatic object of dissection” (p. 81), the pre-eminent object of inquiry inside the body.

Park's argument is developed on a few case studies, nine corpses of women that were opened between 1308 and 1543: two early-fourteenth-century holy women (a visionary abbess, Chiara da Montefalco, and Margherita di Città di Castello) (Chapter 1), four fifteenth-century patrician mothers and wives (Chapter 3), two early sixteenth-century prophetesses (Chapter 4), and the anonymous body of a woman condemned and executed in 1541, leaning on the dissecting table at the centre of the title-page of Andreas Vesalius' *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543) (Chapter 5). The exiguous information available on each case—a few pages in a process of canonization, a few notes in a *Ricordanza*, a passage in a hagiographical text or the often elusive visual or textual reference in an anatomical treatise—is thoroughly analysed and skilfully exploited, following all the threads the sources offered for the reconstitution of the cultural conditions in which the opening of the body took place. With the notable exception of the woman on Vesalius' title-page, they are all bodies that have been opened, manipulated, dismembered and observed for purposes alien to anatomical dissection, such as embalming, autopsy, foetal excision, the inspection and recognition of bodily signs of sanctity. Park's book focuses, in fact, on the opening of the body as a whole, providing a broader context for the historical appreciation of the rise of anatomical dissection. In the book, the emergence of this practise is—as it were—diluted within the cultural framework of notions, beliefs and values shaped by the general understanding of the human body in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, generated, according to Park, by concerns related, primarily, to religion, family and kinship, and, surprisingly, much less by medical issues.

This leads the author, in her comprehensive effort of contextualization, to take into account a number of questions—stemming more or less directly out her sources—concerning, for instance, the history of medieval religious practices, the specific visual culture that shaped

the relationship between the seer and the seen, the values involved in generation, genealogy and kinship, and, above all, the role played by what Park calls a “gendered lens” in shaping the knowledge of the inner body, the empirical approach to observation and, finally, the origin of anatomical dissection.

A question arises, nonetheless, reading this remarkable book. In the otherwise coherent female narrative proposed by Park, why include the opening and embalming of the Popes’ bodies and the procedures of evisceration and “internal embalming” described in the fourteenth century by Guy de Chauliac, the personal physician of Clement VI? These practises, as well as those described in the nine cases carefully studied in the book, apparently confirm Park’s claim about the unproblematic opening of the human body in medieval and Renaissance Christian culture. How can we explain, then, the conflicting evidence of religious uncertainty associated with individual uneasiness, revulsion and disgust generated by the opening of the body, as it emerges, for example, in the *Anatomia* of Guido da Vigevano and in the *Anatomia Richardi* in the first half of the fourteenth century or, at the other end of Park’s chronology, in anatomical texts by Jacques Du Bois (Jacobus Sylvius) and Johannes Dryander (first half of the sixteenth century)? While these questions still remain to be thoroughly examined, *Secrets of women* opens up new perspectives and thinking in this engaging and multifaceted field of research.

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**Ilana Zinguer and Isabelle Martin** (eds), *Théâtre de l’anatomie et corps en spectacle. Fondements d’une science de la Renaissance*, Bern and Oxford, Peter Lang, 2006, pp. x, 351, £40.20, €63.10, \$68.95 (paperback 978-3-03910-962-3).

If there is one subject in medical history that invites an interdisciplinary approach, it is anatomy. Since the second half of the nineteenth

century the humanities (in the form of art history) have occupied themselves with the history of anatomy, *casu quo* anatomical atlases. In the past two or three decades the interest in the history of anatomy from other domains of the humanities has grown considerably. Historians of literature, cultural historians, historians of the theatre, philosophers, linguists, cognitive scientists, all have turned their attention to the subject, often with interesting results.

This collection of essays, *Théâtre de l’anatomie et corps en spectacle*, is an example of such a wide array of disciplines occupying themselves with anatomy. This book contains the proceedings of a conference entitled *Les Théâtres de l’anatomie* organized at the University of Haifa by the Centre de Recherche de Civilisation Française in 2002.

The essays in the book are divided into two parts, roughly along chronological lines; the first part contains essays that mainly deal with subjects from the Renaissance and early modernity. The second part offers subjects from the eighteenth century until the recent past (the last essay is about Jean Genet’s 1950s play *Les Nègres*).

As one of the editors/contributors Ilana Zinguer announces in her ‘Introduction’ that the studies in this book are centred on two themes: anatomy as a science, and the relations between this science and literature. Not surprisingly, I think, this approach works best in the first part of the book. As Louis Van Delft points out in the first essay, ‘Du médical au littéraire’, Renaissance culture is characterized by far less division in narrow specialisms than our age of well-defined separate disciplines. In the Renaissance boundaries between different fields of learning were “supple” and “perméable”. Indeed the goals of anatomists and contemporary poets and writers seemed to overlap; both were searching for the essence of Man and for the identity of his soul.

In Van Delft’s essay the dissection of a subject by the sixteenth-century anatomist is presented as a working method taken over by writers and poets. It would have been interesting as well to learn more about any influence of writers and poets on the activities of anatomists. Especially concerning the theme of the theatre